



**National Drug Intelligence Center Releases
Methadone Diversion, Abuse, and Misuse:
Deaths Increasing at Alarming Rate**

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The National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC), a component of the Department of Justice and the nation's principal center for strategic drug intelligence, has released the *Methadone Diversion, Abuse, and Misuse: Deaths Increasing at Alarming Rate* assessment. This assessment analyzes the increase in methadone-related deaths since the late 1990s, the increase in legitimately prescribed and disbursed methadone, the theft of methadone, and increased availability of diverted methadone.

NDIC has published this assessment in response to the alarming trend in the number of methadone-related deaths which have increased nearly 400 % from 786 deaths in 1999 to 3,849 deaths in 2004 as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In comparison, the number of cocaine-related deaths over the same period increased 43% from 3,822 to 5,461. Most of the methadone-related deaths are attributed to the abuse of methadone illegally diverted from hospitals and pharmacies, or from the offices of health practitioners and pain management physicians. While methadone is a safe and effective drug when prescribed and used correctly, nonfatal overdose or death is likely to occur when it is misused or abused—particularly in combination with other prescription drugs, alcohol, or illicit drugs. Some deaths result from the misuse of legitimately prescribed methadone or methadone obtained from narcotic treatment programs.

Key findings of the report are as follows:

- The total amount of methadone legitimately distributed to businesses increased from 2001 through 2006; the greatest percentage change occurred at the practitioner level, indicating that pain management and general practitioners are dispensing the drug more frequently in the management of pain.
- Methadone thefts from manufacturers, distributors and retailers have increased the amount of methadone available for abuse.
- Diversion from pain management facilities, hospitals, pharmacies, general practitioners, family and friends and, to a lesser extent, narcotics treatment programs increased availability, primarily at the retail level.

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- Diverted methadone distribution at the retail level may occur more frequently than law enforcement reporting indicates.
- Methadone poisoning deaths rose at a higher rate than such deaths involving any other prescription opioid from 1999 through 2004, although the total number of methadone deaths was far fewer than the number of deaths involving other prescription opioids (morphine, oxycodone, hydrocodone, and hydromorphone).
- Some methadone deaths and nonfatal overdoses are the result of misuse of legitimately prescribed methadone by individuals who may not have been properly counseled by their physicians about the dangers of taking the drug in ways other than those prescribed, including in combination with other drugs and/or alcohol.

In preparing the *Methadone Diversion, Abuse, and Misuse: Deaths Increasing at Alarming Rate* assessment, NDIC partnered with federal and state agencies in the collection of data and information. NDIC also conducted interviews with law enforcement and public health officials, pain management specialists, medical examiners, and researchers at several universities regarding methadone diversion, misuse, abuse, and deaths resulting from methadone poisoning.

A copy of the *Methadone Diversion, Abuse, and Misuse: Deaths Increasing at Alarming Rate* assessment can be found at: <http://www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs25/25930/index.htm>.

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